

COMMUNICATIVE TASKS IN TEACHING MILITARY ENGLISH

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Abstract: *Teaching English through genuine interaction in the target language has represented the trademark of communicative language learning, applied in most classrooms around the world. This approach has generated a shift from the perception of language as a system to the focus on more contextual and meaning-related features of language use. Such aspects are in perfect accordance with the needs of military professionals who use English in specific situations. This study explores some of the possibilities of applying the principles of this efficient approach in learning military English with classes of all levels.*

Keywords: *communicative approach, task-based teaching, information gap activities, military English*

1. INTRODUCTION

Development of communication strategies represents the primary aim of foreign language teaching and since English has become the *lingua franca* of our age, learners strive to acquire the ability to use it as a tool for their various enterprises. English has not only spread worldwide but it has also become the language of various professional categories, significantly diversifying the needs of learners. The development of fields like English for Special Purposes (ESP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a sign that teaching English needs to be more varied and learner-oriented.

The types of tasks presented here are designed in view of general parameters, yet, also observing practical aspects of language proficiency required by the special professional environment of the military. As the official language of NATO operations, the English spoken within the military – the armies of the multinational NATO forces – is the official professional language of a great number of military personnel that speaks English as a foreign language.

It is difficult to draw a line between what qualifies as general English and what is English for specific purposes. Even if part of 'specific purposes' may signify a certain professional jargon, its knowledge is irrelevant if the learner does not have the necessary linguistic skills to use them with. Beyond the jargon which is usually learnt on the job, what is more relevant in the case of professional groups, with the military among them, is the interaction with other colleagues within a multinational environment. This fact places the development of communicative proficiency to the forefront of such courses. Communicating in certain specific professional contexts does not necessarily imply the use of a special jargon but a sound command of linguistic skills.

Despite pronounced focus on communication, learning a foreign language covers a lot more than spoken interaction.

As a matter of fact, interactive activities cannot be carried out if learners don't acquire at least a minimal awareness of form and some basic vocabulary.

According to the classical structure of a learning session (presentation-practice-production), tasks would be placed in the production phase. Nevertheless, due to the potential complexity of a task, it may provide both practice and production and generally allows an increased flexibility for both learners and teachers to review or repeat elements of communication when needed. This study is restricted to the presentation of the interactive tasks themselves, without the detailed description of activities that precede or follow the task.

2. MILITARY AND GENERAL ENGLISH

As a category of foreign language teaching, military English is one domain of what is generally discussed as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). A general definition of ESP would be that of “*an umbrella term that refers to the teaching of English to students who are learning the language for a particular work or study related reason*” [2]. According to this definition, it is not the language itself that is ‘special’ but the requirements the students are learning it for.

When attempts are made to determine the boundary between ‘General’ and ‘Special’, there are two main perceptions. One is that there is a common core which covers all basic vocabulary and language completed by an additional specialized language. The alternative idea is that there is no boundary between a core and specialized varieties, since all uses of a language, regardless of the context are ‘specific purpose’ [1]. This discrepancy leads us back to the general definition and, in fact, to the very name of the category: ‘special purposes’ implies the contexts and the aim in which English is used is different from the general one, and not the language itself. This finding can easily be linked to the principles of the Communicative approach that emphasizes the primacy of the communicative situation in language learning and not the system itself.

Barnard and Zemach differentiate between two main types of ESP, one used in the professional (English for Occupational Purposes) and the other in the academic field (English for Academic Purposes). Further subcategories are constituted by the various branches in which learners operate. In the case of English for Occupational Purposes Barnard and Zemach talk about an English for General Purposes – English for Special Purposes continuum with increasing degrees of specialization, the last level being a highly specialized course. Fig. 1 is their example for a scale of the possible courses:

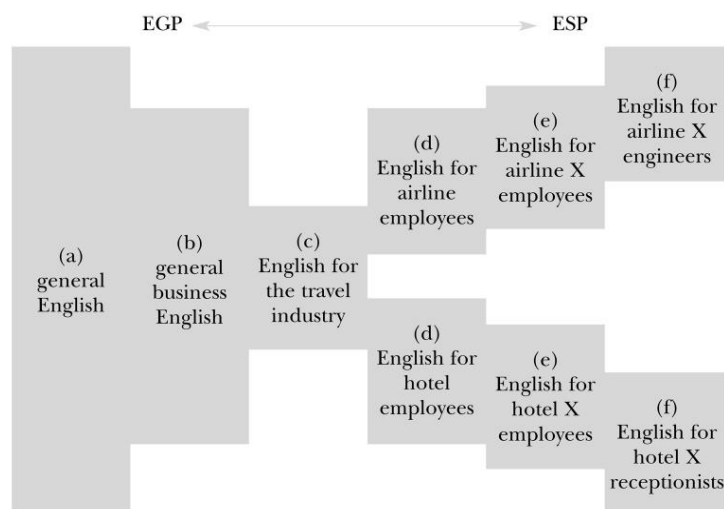


FIG.1 EGP-ESP continuum [2]

Some important points they make are that the more specialized the course, the more expertise it requires from the teacher, but no matter how high the degree of specialization is, there will be an amount of general English included into the content. Furthermore, the degree of specialization does not influence the methods and techniques used in the classroom which will obviously be chosen according to general teaching methodology.

In the case of military English there indeed exists a specific corpus of vocabulary and specific genres (types of texts and discourse) that would typically be used in the military. Terms like *commissary*, *tour of duty*, *peacekeeping*, *warrant officer*, *briefing* to give only a few examples, are not likely to occur in other contexts unless they serve as reference to the military, in a news bulletin, for instance. Yet, if we allow that these terms are part of the 'military English' corpus, what category can we include the vocabulary for aircraft engine spare parts or the specialized vocabulary for missile operations into, if not categories like Technical English or English for Aeronautical Engineering. Therefore, it is fair to establish that certain elements of Specialized Military English overlap with other domains.

Fig. 2 is the application of Barnard and Zemach's EGP-ESP continuum for the specific case of military English, in order to determine the nature of the communicative tasks described in this study.

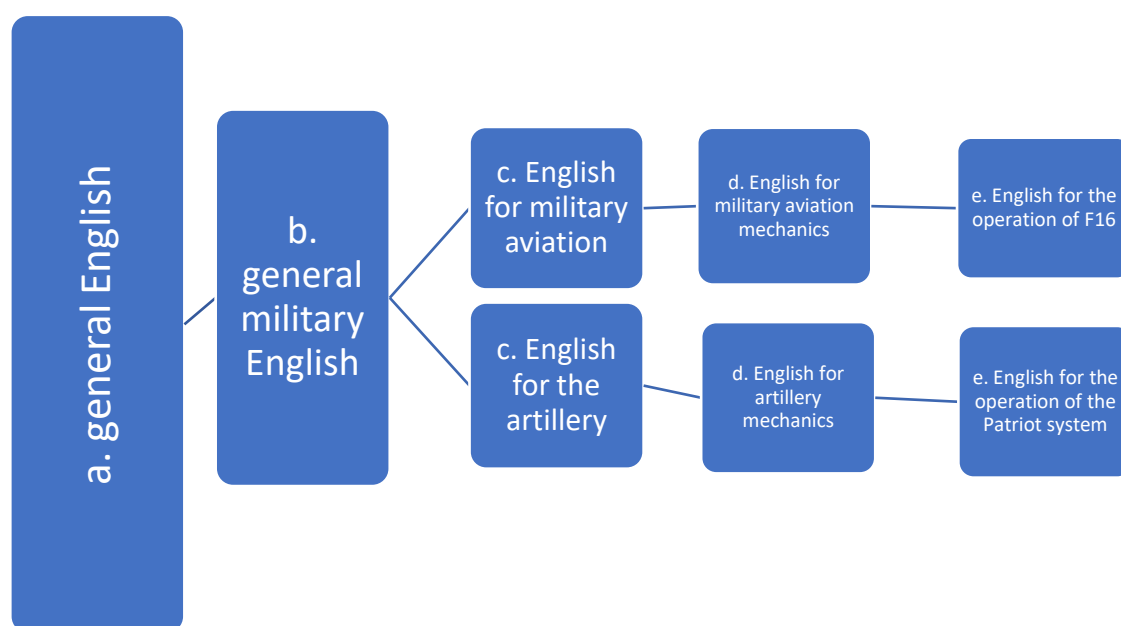


FIG.2 EGP-ESP continuum for military English

According to the points Barnard and Zemach make, the more specific the course, the more specialized the teacher should be, meaning that specialization courses for the operation of weapons systems are taught by military instructors. A highly specialized course contains the vocabulary pertaining to the object of study conveyed within the range of a few typical tasks like describing a process or making a description based on an image or map, or performing a dialogue that may occur in a regular situation at work (e.g. air traffic controllers and pilots).

These aspects relate mostly to the specialized contents of military training and are not part of the common core. They are in fact a technical jargon that service members use in their professional field depending on their service, job or rank.

The content and language that every member of the military uses in their missions and workplace is general military English: general English placed within the context of the military organization and used as a standardized tool of communication.

This context-specific language comes with a well determined practical utility: specific skills and functions, a specific range of contexts, situations and contents military personnel are likely to encounter during their professional activity such as speaking on the phone, addressing service members, giving/carrying out orders and instructions, completing forms, reading/writing correspondence and giving occasional briefings. The subject-matter is to a great extent regulated by the everyday situations like requesting/offering services, solving problems and engaging into standard conversations with peers and the tasks used in the classroom are created around these contexts. As mentioned above, the principles of the communicative approach are in accordance with the specific requirements of military English learners.

3. THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

Communicative language teaching has become the norm in most classrooms around the world, focusing on developing the competence of communication rather than the knowledge related to the language as a system. Historically, its emergence is closely related to the socio-political developments after the Second World War when the US became a leader in both commercial and technological undertakings, with English featuring as a possible common language in an increasingly globalized and multicultural environment. As a result, starting with the 60s, efforts have been made to design courses that aimed to fulfill the linguistic requirements for all those involved in such activities. [2].

At the same time, in Europe, similar efforts were being made to design a frame of reference to be used in the case of all languages within the European Union [14]. The main beneficiaries of these efforts were those involved in the activity of the Common European Market, the general idea being to develop courses for adults who would be using English in their business and economic activities. Professional topics were not exclusive, though, since these courses were aiming to provide a well-rounded training that would include preparation for recreational and touristic activities as well [11]. What followed is today's Common European Framework widely used as a benchmark in describing and assessing linguistic level proficiency [7].

The principles applied in the foreign language class stem from viewing the use of language as *action*. Communication as competence entails not only knowledge of form and vocabulary but also a more practical ability of applying that knowledge in authentic contexts, shaped by a particular cultural milieu in which we make our presence felt and we *exist* through our verbal manifestations.

From a narrower, methodological point of view this idea materializes in the use of the target language in the classroom as much as possible, concentrating on the desired outcome: making the interlocutor understand. Interaction with other learners is a basic requirement; this is why pair and group work are favored to individual work. In the course of their interaction, learners usually 'play' themselves. This means, even when they perform a role play, they react and interact according to their personality, life experience, personal preferences, etc. Their behavior is genuine.

Most of the input (teaching materials) is authentic, modified as little as possible even in the case of beginners. This does not exclude the possibility of using abridged or simplified material if necessary, but it is essential that learners' reaction to it be genuine, meaning, it should be able to elicit authentic behavior [15].

Authenticity includes the choice of contexts as well. The topics and situations explored in the classroom pertain to what learners are likely to encounter in real life where they should be able to use the skills acquired in class [21, 22].

A question that often arises in connection with the communicative approach is the teaching of grammar. There are degrees of permissiveness towards form. A more 'radical' understanding of the principles standing at the basis of this approach, a theory of the so called 'strong' version [14] belongs to Stephen Krashen whose input hypothesis has attracted both popularity and controversy. Krashen vouches for a 'natural' way of learning a language, stating that language acquisition occurs when an individual learns subconsciously, just like children learn their native language in the first few years of their lives. According to Krashen's hypothesis, all learners need is a *comprehensible input*, meaning language that they can understand but which is slightly above their level represented by the formula $i+1$ where i is the input and 1 is the addition to the students' level [9]. This hypothesis leaves language learning to '*take care of itself*' [8] basically assigning teachers the role to expose their students to as much input as possible and wait for the best.

Stating quite the opposite, Widdowson attributes great importance to raising awareness on how language works, especially in the case of those learners who have the '*capacity or disposition for analytic self-reflection*'. In these cases, comparing the foreign language to their native one, for example, would '*increase motivation by giving added point to their activities, and so enhance learning.*' The key, Widdowson thinks, is to teach grammar in such a way that its '*intrinsic communicative character is understood and acted upon*' [15]. Such approaches belong to the 'weak' version of communicative teaching. It should be noted that activities focusing on grammar pattern are helpful with all levels but they are absolutely essential with beginners who need to become conscious of the sentence structure of the target language and to understand that the foreign language they are learning works differently from theirs.

Placed in a social context, the broader interpretation of acting through language posits the speaker as a '*social agent*', a member of society who accomplishes various tasks '*in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action*'. Speaking is not an action if we don't place it alongside other '*cognitive, emotional and volitional resources*' through which the individual (ideally) achieves self-actualization [7]. As difficult as it may be sometimes to remember, this is ultimately the goal for learners and teachers.

4. TASK-BASED LEARNING

The teaching unit through which the principles of the communicative approach are put into practice is the *task*, its "*ultimate logical extension*" [10]. The definitions for task revolve around the same principles. According to Prabhu it is a '*meaning –focused activity*' [13]. David Nunan defines it as "... *a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form*" [12]. Jane Willis has a more technical explanation in store: "...*goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings not producing specific language forms.*"[16].

Both Nunan and Willis speak of manipulating, producing, interacting and exchanging language so that meaning is obtained. Widdowson explains the process of using a language by speakers as constant negotiation with the resources they have at their disposal, "... *manipulating the input so that it is optimally comprehensible*" [15].

Meaning for the participants to communication implies constant adjustment to their interlocutor and attempt to predict his/her intentions. Whenever a gap occurs in the flow of information, the participants to the dialogue fill in the blanks for each other [15]. This continuous interaction is the basis of communication that ends in consensus (on the meaning, at least).

Task-based teaching is not the ultimate method for the communicative approach which is much rather an umbrella term for the various classroom activities that align with the principles of learning language through various authentic contexts by using linguistic functions. As a matter of fact, task-based teaching is considered an approach on its own [17, 8]. Still, its relationship to the communicative approach is one of subordination since it employs communicative learning principles in order to work out a system based on a clear procedure. This comprises of pre-task activities, the task itself and language focus. Even if these phases of the procedure are well-established, the concrete activities used within each phase can be varied according to the needs of the class or the individual learners. In addition, there being no time limit for the discrete phases there can be incorporated as many activities as necessary in order to obtain the desired outcome. For instance, pre-task activities can include a revision of previous content in order to prepare learners for task completion, or language focus might as well consist of grammar exercises meant to raise language awareness, if necessary.

Various authors provide different classifications of types of tasks according to their functions (Willis), type of practice they offer (Nunan) or the operational principle behind the task (Prabhu). In order to describe the tasks used in the classroom for military English, Prabhu's classification allows a transparent and comprehensive classification according to level and complexity.

Prabhu classifies tasks into three categories [13]. The procedure in the case of an *information gap activity*, the least complex type, consists of the transfer of information from one person to another, typically based on materials like gapped tables (table completion), a picture lacking some details, or some other support that requires the completion of the missing information. The participants contribute with the data provided to them by the teacher (e.g. role cards) or use information that is easily accessible to them (e.g. personal details) conveyed through the language they can handle at their level.

The *reasoning gap activity* is similar to the information gap type but its complexity is increased in the way that the information the learner needs to find out is not identical with what is comprehended: based on the obtained information the learner needs to use inference, deduction, practical reasoning, perception of relationships or patterns in order to reach the desired outcome. The output that results from the task is the learner's own. S/he uses his/her own words for the reasoning whereas the information gap task provides the cue for the learner's answer. For example, learners can be given a task to work out the best solution for a particular situation. The classical example would be the activity entitled *Lifeboat* in which students have to decide which person should be saved first based on a set of information they have about them.

The *opinion gap activity* is different from the previous two in the fact that no preferred outcome is necessary. Learners are given some information based on which they complete a story, state their opinion and share their feelings related to that situation or issue, as in a debate or discussion. The open-ended nature of this type of activity may seem disorganized from the point of view of task-based learning since having a particular solution to the problem discussed usually gives a sense of security to learners. Yet, as Prabhu argues, advanced learners appreciate the possibility to express themselves without the constraints imposed by a task.

5. LINGUISTIC LEVELS

The task types outlined above are typical for the three main language proficiency levels, generally described as beginner, intermediate and advanced. Obviously, task complexity can always be tailored to the level of the class and the individual learners and adapted to further sub levels (false beginner, pre-intermediate, upper-intermediate, etc.).

The two relevant documents enumerating and describing in more or less complexity the functions that constitute each level are the STANAG 6001 descriptor for military English and the CEF (Common European Framework) for general English. The latter distinguishes two types of speaking skills. *Oral production* refers to the competence of delivering a monologue or discourse (with a complexity that depends on the level), for example, interconnected sentences, presentation, narration, description, etc. *Oral interaction* refers to the ability to participate to conversations, carry out various transactions or negotiate a position, just to name a few. The document describing the standardized language proficiency levels applied within NATO, the STANAG 6001 does not distinguish between the two types of oral competence but provides level descriptions which include oral interaction and presents examples for typical military tasks [7, 23].

The CEF marks the discrete levels with letters (A, B, C) and numbers to differentiate between sublevels (1 and 2 for each letter), A being the equivalent of the beginner and C that of the advanced. The STANAG marks levels by numbers (the ones relevant for this study are 1, 2 and 3), where 1 is the beginner and 3 can be considered as the equivalent of the advanced level. It should be emphasized that even if the NATO description can be used as a guideline for learning/teaching (if combined with the more complex CEF) its function is that of assessment. The descriptive elements of the two documents relevant for the communicative tasks described below will be presented for each level separately. The tasks used for the beginner and intermediate levels have been used in completion of lessons included in *Campaign 1 and 2*, textbooks [4, 5] used to teach general military English.

6. COMMUNICATIVE TASKS

As explained earlier, communication does not only imply knowledge of form in the target language but also the behavior and the context that requires a certain linguistic function. This entails the activation of various *routines* representing schematic knowledge (Widdowson, 1990: 103) related to the elements of discourse, cultural background, or socio-professional situation.

Information routines help speakers identify the right organizational elements when telling a joke or narrating a story. They consist in generic conventions that represent common knowledge within a culture. Another set of routines is used by speakers when interacting with each other and they help carrying out a conversation in its conventional pattern: e.g. the routine of buying a ticket, greeting a friend, inviting somebody to a party, etc. [6]. The role of pre-task activities is to activate these schemata for further use [3].

6.1 Tasks for beginners. The beginner level is described by both sources as the ability to ask and answer questions and communicate in the context of '*short social exchanges*' [7] or '*simple, short conversations*' [23]. Activities aimed at developing this ability can range from mere formulations of questions in the target language to simple role plays with a predictable scenario, like inviting a friend to a place, or making a simple transaction like buying an item. The additional military background is provided by placing these exchanges into the context of workplace interaction and routine.

Providing personal information is a typical task in this case, ensuing activities of raising language awareness and practicing the simple question patterns. Questioning a new visitor to the base is a possible scenario for this task with role play cards such as the following:

You are the on duty at the checkpoint. Your name is Sg. Smith. Ask the visitor:

- Name Rank
- His unit
- Military ID nr.
- By car?
- License plate nr.

You are a visitor in Fort Blueville. Your name is Lt. Paul King. You are on a mission. You want to enter the unit. Answer the questions the sergeant asks.

Unit 23009 Greentown
Military ID nr. 33498700
Car HNY 5098

Similar cards are devised for each pair (depending on the number of students) and questions can vary according to the type of question that is being practiced or the general topic of the lesson. For example, pairs may be tasked to interrogate each other about their unit or about various military equipment. In the case of the latter a data card is probably necessary which contains information publicly available (It would probably be connected to the practice of question patterns like *how heavy...*, *how fast...*, *how big, etc.*).

6.2 Tasks for intermediate students. The interaction characteristic of this level pertains to *'every day and routine work-related matters'* [23] or *'familiar routine and non-routine matters'* like *'returning an unsatisfactory purchase'* and explain *'why something is a problem'* [7]. Typical tasks for the military field would be *'solving practical problems such as travel itineraries and accommodation'* or *'deliver/request information... to carry out assigned duties.'* [23]. Tasks that elicit interaction for this level would ideally be a combination between information gap and reasoning gap activities, where learners find out information in order to find solutions in various common situations and, to a certain extent, justify the choice they are making.

A scenario used for this level is related to organizing some sort of event in the military unit, like open gates day, national day (in a foreign mission), or, possibly a more complex activity, organizing a military exercise in a particular unit. Ideally, students in groups of three can come up with their version for the event and present it to the class afterwards. A stock image of a map is helpful to mark the various points of attraction in order for colleagues to understand the stages of the event. Below is a possible task card:

Your unit is organizing Open Gates Day next month and you have been tasked to organize the event. This year marks the 50th anniversary of your unit's existence, therefore, you need to prepare with a special program in addition to the usual ones. Make a plan for the various activities, include two original ones for this special occasion, and then make a schedule. Mark the location of the points of interest for visitors. Finally, present your plan in front of the class.

Another possible scenario revolves around the transfer/relocation from one unit to another, a situation in which certain rules and regulations are applied. As a pre-task activity a conversation about these regulations is in place, which does not only introduce the topic but provides an opportunity for learners to review language related to permission, obligation, probability, possibility, etc. In addition, they may need to be reminded or taught some of the expressions, typical questions and forms of address that occur in such conversations. After the students are divided in pairs, they can perform their tasks. Here is one example:

You are the commanding officer for C Coy. Your unit is preparing for an important exercise taking place next month. You are rather short of personnel and you need every man you've got. Sg. Richards is one of the NCOs you rely on.

You are Sg. Richards working in C Coy. Your wife has recently given birth to your third child so you would like to relocate to a unit closer to your hometown so that your parents can help with the baby. Go to the commander and discuss the issue.

6.3 Tasks for advanced students. The advanced level implies the use of *'formal and informal language for most social and professional situations'* which entails the ability to convey *'detailed arguments for and against different opinions'* [23]. Activities that develop this ability must offer learners the opportunity to *'argue a formal position'* [7]. This implies participating to discussions, simulated panels, debates, in which they not only develop a line of argument in favour or against the debated issue but they also perform a *'representative function'* [23] as spokespeople for an organization or various categories, or as representatives of the military unit or of the country (liaison officers, attaches, etc.). Such situations require a lot of schematic knowledge, therefore, pre-task activities, ideally listening and reading material should present various data on the issue, analyses and opinion pieces which allow learners to understand various points of view and extract enough data to be able to formulate some line of argument.

The following example is a simulated panel discussion, involving characters representing different categories in a debate that occurred a few years ago related to a controversy around high-ranking medals being awarded to drone operators. The discussion was prepared by various materials discussing the changes that have occurred in warfare due to technology and the psychological impact this may entail [18, 19, 20]. More concretely, the discussion revolved around the possibility that drone operators, who launch attacks remotely, from the physical safety of their units, may be regarded as equally contributors to war efforts with infantry or other categories carrying out dangerous missions on the actual location of warzones.

While preparing for the task (which involves the whole group, 8 to 10 students) the roles are distributed as follows: panel leader, Vietnam War veteran, army psychologist, author of a book on the changing ways of warfare, recruitment officer for drone pilots, fighter pilot, infantryman, drone operator and possible additions state official from Washington and Army economist. Ideally, learners should gather data while preparing for their role, from the materials they have at their disposal and, if necessary, from the internet. The discussion should be long enough to allow each participant to state their point of view and, ideally, make room for exchanges between those representing different points of view.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The success of using interactive activities in the foreign language class depends on their genuine communicative value which may motivate learners even with lower levels. Information gap activities should be used as early as possible in order to generate interactive situations in the classroom. Reliance on the students' personal experience and activities that require them to share information about themselves may generate situations in which real communication occurs. Despite the fact that lower levels need various types of assistance and can rarely engage in genuine production, these tasks help familiarize learners with language specifics and launch them on their way towards speaking.

Even if it hasn't been discussed at length in this study, it should be noted that elaborate and varied pre-task activities significantly contribute to task completion as they prepare learners. Language awareness activities should be used both before and after task completion in order for learners to understand the use of language and the significance of one or another technique. Speaking as a productive skill is merely the *'tip of the iceberg'* when it comes to using the language. By the time learners can interact autonomously they will have acquired a solid language base.

Bringing professionally relevant material to class does not only motivate the learner through its authenticity or engaging nature but it must also convince through its significance for his/her goals. The learners participating to courses need to be certain that the activities they carry out in the classroom help them advance toward professional accomplishment. In order to encourage communication these activities should evoke or reproduce specific contexts that the military person recognizes as relevant for his/her activity. The best feedback a teacher can get is when her students identify these situations as genuine (as they have experienced or discussed it) and express certainty that next time they will be able to handle the situation better.

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